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Social Studies

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A Tale of Gold and Glory



by Elizabeth Hines



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People have been interested in exploring unknown places for many centuries. Some people looked for riches. Some people looked for new lands to conquer. Some groups looked for places to start a new life. Other people explored because they wanted to know more about the land. Over the centuries, humans kept going until they explored almost every place on Earth. But five hundred years ago there were still many lands to explore in the New World.

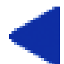




Some explorers came to the New World looking for gold objects, like this one, made by Native American people.

riches: things that make people wealthy

New World: North and South America





While trying to find a new way to get to India and China, Columbus landed in the New World.



In the year 1492, the king and queen of Spain gave three ships to the explorer Christopher Columbus. They wanted him to find an easy way to sail to India and China. They also wanted him to find gold. Columbus never got to China or India. Instead he and his crew of sailors landed in the New World. Columbus made the dangerous journey to the Americas four times, but he never found much gold.

Other explorers also came to the Americas. Most of the early explorers were from Spain. They fought with people of the Native American nations they found in the new lands and conquered them.





 Gold objects from the Inca people

 Native American nations did not use gold for money. But some of them, such as the Incas and the Aztecs, had many gold objects. Some people in the Americas adorned their bodies with gold jewelry. The Spanish conquerors wanted those riches.

The Spanish conquerors heard stories about nations with even more gold than the Incas or Aztecs. They were especially interested in stories about the Seven Cities of Cíbola (SEE boh lah), also known as the Seven Cities of Gold.

Incas: Native American people who lived in the mountains of Peru and other lands of South America

Aztecs: Native American people who lived in southern Mexico





 This old map of western North America shows where the Spanish thought the Seven Cities of Cíbola were.

 In 1539 the Spaniards (people from Spain) had conquered much of the land that is now the country of Mexico. They defeated the Aztecs and other nations in the area. They called the land New Spain and made Mexico City their capital. According to the stories, the land of Cíbola was north of Mexico City near the present states of New Mexico and Arizona. The Spaniards decided to send someone to find it. They chose a Spanish monk, Marcos de Niza (MAR kohs day NEE sah). Marcos went north with a small group of guides and scouts to find Cíbola and its golden cities.

monk: a man who belongs to a religious group

scouts: explorers who go out ahead of the main group







Marcos de Niza traveled mostly through hot, dry deserts in search of Cíbola.



Marcos and his group traveled north for many days. Most of the land was harsh and dry. They crossed deserts and mountains. After traveling hundreds of miles, they reached an area that today is part of the state of Arizona.

Marcos believed he was close to Cíbola, so he sent a group of scouts ahead. He told them to find the way to Cíbola. After four days, one of the scouts sent a message back. The message said that he had found something interesting.





The Spaniards believed the Seven Cities of Gold were in a land called Cíbola, north of Mexico City near the present states of New Mexico and Arizona. Cíbola was not a real place, and there were no cities of gold.



Marcos de Niza waited, but there were no more messages from the scouts. Something was wrong. Finally, some of the scouts returned to Marcos, wounded and fearful. They had found a city, but the lead scout had been killed there. They did not want to go back. Marcos convinced two of the scouts to take him to the city. In the end, Marcos himself became fearful when they got close to the city. He never reached that city. He never saw gold or riches.



Coronado (on the white horse) and his men brought plenty of weapons on their search for Cíbola.



When Marcos got back to New Spain, rumors spread about a large city, full of riches. After hearing his report, people believed that Marcos had seen one of the Seven Cities of Cíbola.

The next step was to send a small army to conquer the land of Cíbola. The leaders of New Spain selected Francisco Vasquez de Coronado for this job. Like many others, Coronado was eager for the gold and glory that would come to him if he could conquer Cíbola.

In winter of 1540, he started his journey. He brought with him over 300 soldiers. He also brought cattle, sheep, and goats for food. More than 800 men and a few women came with Coronado to carry supplies, cook, and serve as guides and scouts. Many of the people believed they would come home rich.

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glory: great praise and honor







The Grand Canyon



After four months of difficult travel, Coronado finally came to the land he believed was Cíbola. The large city that Marcos had described was never found. Instead, Coronado found a small Zuni village. The homes of the Zuni people stood side by side, forming a kind of wall for protection. The Zuni were not happy to see Coronado and his army. Zuni warriors stood on the flat roofs of their houses, ready to defend their village.

The Zuni lost the battle. Coronado and his soldiers conquered their village. To his surprise, Coronado found no gold or precious jewels in the village.

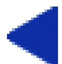
Coronado kept searching for the Seven Cities of Gold. He sent scouts to the east. They explored far. They reached the land that now is the state of Kansas. They saw thousands of buffalo and great wide plains.



Coronado also sent scouts to the west who found the Grand Canyon. Today, millions of people travel each year to look at this beautiful natural wonder.

In 1542, Coronado returned to New Spain without the gold he wanted. He had traveled far and tried hard to find the Seven Cities of Cíbola. But the cities were not there.

Zuni: Native American nation in Arizona and New Mexico







Everyone in New Spain had been certain that the Cities of Gold were real. What had gone wrong? Nobody knows yet why Marcos de Niza told the story of seeing the city of gold. Some historians think that he did not want to disappoint the people who sent him on his journey.

No one believes in the Seven Cities of Gold anymore. But people still like to dream and tell stories of gold and glory.

Did You Know? **Gold, A Precious Metal**

Gold was discovered and used by humans about 6,000 years ago. Gold does not rust, and it does not lose its color. Ancient people used it for decorations and for jewelry. Some ancient people also used gold to make plates, cups, and small statues. People of a few cultures even used gold to cover parts of their buildings. Gold was used to make money in the form of coins. Gold is still used today, especially for jewelry and to make gold coins. Gold is called a precious metal because it is not abundant in nature, and it is very valuable.

historians: people who study the past





Talk About It

1. Where did the Spanish conquerors think they would find the land of Cíbola?
2. Why do you think people told stories about cities of gold? Why do you think people believed that the rich cities existed?

Write About It

3. Imagine that you are one of the people who went with Coronado on his journey. Write a letter describing what you saw when you got to the land that is part of the southwestern United States.

Extend Language

The suffix *-en* can be added to certain nouns to form new words. *Silk* is a kind of cloth, and *silken* means "made of silk." What does *golden* mean?

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